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ABSTRACT

One approach to the study of the televised image is through the combination of signs, created through production choices. Just as a linguistic sign does not carry exclusively the thoughts of its author but interposes its own material form (thus affecting reading of the text), so does the production choice (technique) infect the thought of the television writer, producer, director, and viewer. One of the dominant stylistic features within the television picture is its varied treatment of time and space. A given space, as defined through the depth of field of a shot, depends upon several technological conditions, such as the amount of light and the speed of the lens. To complement this treatment, one also has to account for the actual physical distance of object/subject to camera position. This space dictates the staging and blocking of the action. Ultimately, the area in which the "what" and the "how" of the viewer's pictorial experience unfold is determined by a variety of technological conditions that, in turn, both specify the staging, the quality of the lens, and the light level of the scene and define the physical studio space. Every successful technique expressed through the image contains traces of production applications, differences not chosen but within the realm of conventional procedures, pictorial signs, and formulas. Informed production techniques and knowledge of the conditions inherent in production are imperative and indicate a strong demand for a revised television dramaturgy. (HOD)

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TECHNIQUES IN TELEVISION DRAMA: A CASE FOR A REVISED DRAMATURGY

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TECHNIQUES IN TELEVISION DRAMA: A CASE FOR A REVISED DRAMATURGY

When attempting to discuss dramatic works, one ought to be cognizant of the specific form which casts the content of the dramatic work. Since several formal media exist for dramatic accounts in contemporary society (e.g., the book, the stage,radio, film and television), the question of form as it affects style and eventually content assumes an ever greater importance in any discussion regarding the genre of drama. In this paper we will address the medium of television as to some of its intrinsic stylistic devices, expressed by specific television production techniques and conditions, which render and affect the artistic qualities of television drama. We submit that the meaning of television drama is strongly tied to the specific stylistic/technological production conventions (its dramaturgy), which define the television drama's basis of existence.

Techniques in television drama function on a syntagmatic plane. They determine the appropriateness (or inappropriateness) of combining certain image elements, while arriving at a larger unit of meaning within the surface structure of the television picture. They also achieve a higher associative,paradigmatic plane through variations of the same production technique, occupying the same position within the production context, yet generating different meanings within the pictorial sign surface structure. Viewing the

televised image (which is composed of combinations, variations and spacing of signs), evokes recall of the viewer's memory, inviting him to comparisons and free associations. The paradigmatic plane, or as the French literary critic Roland Barthes has called it, the systematic plane, exhibits a close relation to the general system of language, while the syntagmatic encounter with the televised image bears closer resemblance to the act of speaking.

The value and importance of extrapolating the language model to our investigation becomes clearer and more accessible if addressed in an historical context. If we agree that any dramatic activity is backgrounded synchronically against certain contextual conditions and if we acknowledge further that the foregrounding (in our case the kind of specific dramatic tension in a dramatic oeuvre) is diachronically placed within any given society in which the dramatic work originates and operates, then we will be able to observe a gradual shift from spoken to written, to visual language. Since Greek tragedy, the resolution of tension has been operative in the domain of catharsis, defined by Aristotle as a cleansing element for society. He determined its function as acting through pity and fear as relief for the audience in a constantly threatened and chaotic world. In this context, the medium of language becomes the dominant formal device. Resolving tension in Greek culture meant narrowing the schism between the opposing forces of creativity as inspired by the Muses, the Nietzschean Dyonesian, and structure

through form, reflected in techné (the craft of making), the Apollonian. Heracles' 'logos,' the word, tamed and forced the orgiastic, tempting demons of man's creative energies into a structured form of language. This formalistic device, language, in its various expressive, stylistic modalities separates the word from the gesture, the dialogue from mime. In Western civilization, language was cast into a formal, rigorous field of inquiry, ancient rhetoric, which developed its own style (poetics) and syntax (grammar).

In modern times, through the works of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, we have acknowledged that language (langage) has two distinctive modalities: langue (identifying the available options, choices of the language compository) and parole (exhibiting the distinctive, individual choices of the speaker). Saussure's insight into the fundaments of language have provided us with the understanding that language is a system of signs, both conventional and arbitrary. More importantly, each sign distinguishes itself not through essential properties, but through the differences with other signs. This difference becomes the catalyst in the production of a system of differences and a very useful mode of reading a dramatic text. Acknowledging différance (as coined by the French de-constructionist Jacques Derrida), the traces of elements which form the linkage of the spoken or written discourse with those signs of language

latent but not yet actualized in the exhibited system of signs, provides us with the intellectual strategy to read a dramatic television text , and reveal the central position of formal television production elements in the shaping of meaning. Just as a linguistic sign does not carry exclusively the thoughts of its author but interposes its own material form (that is affecting reading of the text), so does the production choice (technique) infect the thought of the television writer, producer, director and viewer.

Since we have defined our task as investigating the techniques in television drama in order to revise a dramaturgy, we need to concentrate on those dramatic production choices which intrinsically support the visual text and imbue it with meaning. We hope to support our previous claim that the visual text is as rich as any written or spoken text in generating meaning through syntagmatic and paradigmatic combinations, variations and associations. Primarily, we will study the televised image as the compository of signs, created through the production choices. To follow a traditional flow of cause (production place, equipment utilized, technique, etc.) to effect the televised image, is not advantageous in our situation. The concept of 'différance' as previously introduced can be studied at the level of the sign, discussing its arrangement (passive function of the sign) and its distribution or arranging (active function of the sign) within the flow of signs. Through this

de-constructionist mode of reading the visual text we are reversing, exchanging the hierarchization of cause and effect. We regard the effect as preceding the cause, i.e., to cause the cause, so that the effect becomes the source in our investigation. In effect, we are testing the affect of the image as the origin of generating meaning. As those familiar with the work of the American literary critic Jonathan Culler will agree, this last statement is not a play on language but a philosophical position which inverts priorities. The result is a concentration upon the televised image and its sign structure, projected onto millions of people, instead of upon production processes.

The sign in itself consists of two components in addition to is passive and active roles in the weaving of the visual text. These two components are the signifier and the signified. The signified bears resemblance to the idea or concept. It is not a thing but a mental representation of the thing. The signifier is the mediator, it is a pure relatum. Carrier and concept are unified in the process of signification. Behind the signifier we will find the signified. This process is a product of the sign.

The preceding brief description of linguistic analysis, which seems to approach the larger question of various opposite levels of 'différance' (including imagery), should permit us to penetrate the deep structure of the television image. The description of production

techniques (in our context stylistics of the production process) should guide our understanding from the deep structure underlying the activities within the sign to the actual surface structure (the easily recognizable forms and conventions effected in television drama). The process should affirm the potentially central position of technique, aiding in the creation of meaning through structure, i.e., in recognizable features, forms, conventions within the visual context, which enables television drama's form and meaning.

One of the dominant stylistic features within the television picture is its varied treatment of time and space. Through the specific structure of the image, several functions of the sign begin to be operative simultaneously. Visualize the following scene:

> Early evening. Dining room set. In the foreground a telephone, clearly visible, ringing. Two people are standing in the background talking, barely recognizable. The phone keeps ringing, the focus of our attention is shifted from the phone to the two people, who have stopped their conversation and look intensely at the continously ringing phone. The overall pictorial ratio has not been changed. Nevertheless, we are concentrating on the two people, asking ourselves, why aren't they answering the phone? The maid enters. She walks straight to the phone, stops suddenly, sensing the presence of the two other people in the dining room. She turns slowly, looks at them, they look at her. Nobody talks, nor moves. The phone stops ringing. The scene changes almost unnoticeably to another set, revealing only a hand putting down a telephone receiver. The picture turns to black.

This minimal scene ought to serve as a paradigm of the complex structure of signs which act in combination and variation to create

the visual text. We will now begin to analyze this sign structure to reveal the existence of conventional procedures, of repetitive formulas (i.e., serial constructs) contained in techniques necessary to allow for a context to unfold, and generate concsciousness and meaning for the viewer.

First, we ought to recall that a given space, as defined through the 'depth of field' of a shot (i.e., simply through what is in focus within the picture) depends upon several technological conditions to be met. The amount of light available in the studio will affect the aperture setting of my camera's optics. The more light, the smaller the lens opening, the larger the depth of field and vice versa. Further, the speed of the lens used will also define the depth of field in which the action can take place. The amount of light which ought to fall upon a scene is, however, not exclusively determined by the space. The quantity as well as the quality of the light is a direct response to the contextual situation of a scene, the information the set should reveal, as well as the mood it ought to evoke for the viewer. However, this light is just the beginning of a series of interrelated conditions to be achieved in order to create that specific television image. If we pursue this perspective, we will observe that the light causes shadows which emphasize the mood, the time of the situation, as well as its organic (i.e., its realistic) depth perspective. Not only do we become aware of 'what' we are seeing, but also of the 'how' of this 'what.' The depth of field of a given shot (while acknowledging

denotatively the question of space) produces signs, which behave simultaneously as signifier and signified through serial combinations, variations, and spacing of individual signs. They engage each other on the syntagmatic plane and appeal to the systematic plane of the viewer's consciousness, while evoking his memory. The systematic (or paradigmatic) plane exists in the deep structure of the television image. Our example demanded a certain amount and a certain kind of light in order to evoke the specific time orientation (evening) and mood (mysterious). Light is one production variable. We had various choices to select from. There is cameo lighting, silhouette lighting, Rembrandt lighting. All these forms of lighting techniques are grouped under the heading of chiaroscuro lighting. The latter is placed against flat or no-tan lighting. Substituting any of these kinds of lighting techniques, occuping the same position within the production context, would have generated different or shifted meanings within the pictorial sign surface structure.

To complement the treatment of the televised space via depth of field techniques, we also have to account for the actual physical distance of object/subject to camera position. This space dictates staging and blocking of the action, referred to as 'mise-en-scène'. Ultimately, the area in which the 'what' and the 'how' of the viewer's pictorial experience (which we previously addressed) unfolds, is determined by a variety of technological conditions which,

in turn, specify the 'mise-en-scène' directions, the quality of the lens, the light level of the scene, and define the physical studio space.

The televised image connotes all of the production choices and techniques for evocation of certain viewer responses. Every successful technique expressed through the image contains traces of production applications, differences not chosen, but within the realm of conventional procedures, pictorial signs, formulas. In our example, the telephone (clearly in the foreground) and people (in the background, out of focus, barely visible, at the extreme end of the depth of field of this particular set-up) invite the technique of 'rack focus', a shifting of the focus within our visual frame. The viewer follows this move from foreground (phone) to background (people) without any obvious difficulty. The 'rack focus' technique contains trace elements of the subsequent, not yet actualized sign. The viewer's holistic account of such a contextual situation has been appealed to, drawing upon latent trace elements of the actualized information.

Continuing our reading of the visual text, the slight shift, 'pan' of the camera, allows for the maid's entrance into the depth of field. She can walk toward the phone in the foreground because the arranged depth of field of this particular shot invites the 'mise-en-scène' direction. The low light level, resulting in more pronounced shadows, clearly defines the time of day

as early evening. The 'cut' to a 'close-up' of the maid jumps space while also isolating her within the contextual situation. The next cut to the 'two-shot' of the people in the background juxtaposes the maid against the two people. The possible tension which this cutting sequence might evoke is a result of the invisible energy field between the two pictures. The cut as a mode of transition and the rhythm with which it is executed are formal production techniques (choices) which, as stated above, weave the sign structure, permitting the viewer to enter via this structure into the meaning of the text.

When the image changes to a cover shot, situating all the elements (of the text, maid, people, phone) within the same context, a certain level of closure has been achieved. However, this image is almost instantaneously set against the subsequent shot which reveals a C.U. of a hand, placing the receiver back onto the telephone. A parallel action, is taking place. We have jumped locations (space) within the same moment, i.e., within the present. The shot just prior to the C.U. (the phone had stopped ringing) contained simultaneously in itself the action we are cutting to. The cover shot then functions as a repository of relations between past and future (our present). The cut to the C.U. is not at all surprising to the viewer. Context and passive active roles of the signs have prepared him for the pictorial flow. The question the viewer raises and which sustains the tension of the text pertains to who that person is and why he/she called. Further, why did the maid stop

and why did the two people hesitate answering this call? Most likely, the final resolution of this mystery will be revealed as quite different from our immediate expectations - providing for the surprise element of such material.

Yet, for our thesis, these are questions of secondary nature. Of primary interest is the usage of space in motion within the same moment of time. Again, the notion that the cover shot carried in itself the trace elements of the subsequent shot simultaneously (exposed to us through the technique of the cut) should support our claim that techniques have become a language, formal devices, which aid the viewer to resolve the catharsis while guiding him in the passage from deep structure to surface texture of the image and vice versa. Informed production techniques and knowledge of the conditions inherent in production are imperative and indicate a strong demand for a revised television dramaturgy.

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